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ELLERY QUEEN'S *Mystery Magazine*®

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a **NEW** short story by

JACK RITCHIE

Let's say a man goes to a gambling club run by a notorious mobster, loses a large sum of money at roulette and blackjack on his personal I.O.U.'s, and then can't pay. Is the man's life in danger? You bet it is. But suppose that same man wins a large sum of money. Is his life still in danger? Well, look at it from this point of view: the mobster is out a large sum of money either way! . . .

THE WAY TO DO IT

by **JACK RITCHIE**

Within the space of an hour I won \$3000 at the roulette table. The girl had been at my elbow for the last 30 minutes. She was quite attractive and had greenish eyes. "This seems to be your lucky night."

I won another \$1000, during the course of which I learned that her name was Adrienne McCloskey.

I picked up my chips and moved on to the blackjack tables.

Adrienne followed. "You've got a streak going at roulette. Why switch to blackjack?"

I smiled. "Roulette is entirely a matter of chance. Or luck, as you would put it. I've decided that I prefer an intellectual challenge, and blackjack, to some degree, gives one a slight control over one's fortunes."

I joined three other patrons at one of the blackjack tables.

I was dealt a nine down and an eight up. Seventeen. I asked the dealer to hit me and received a four. Which, of course, gave me twenty-one.

Adrienne McCloskey winced. "You hit seventeen? Everybody stands on seventeen. Everybody."

"I don't."

I was next dealt a ten down and a nine up. Nineteen. The dealer's exposed card was an eight. I was rather tempted to hit my nineteen

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anyway, but then I thought that I must not be too obvious. I stood on the nineteen and the dealer on his eighteen, and so I won once again.

I continued my policy of hitting anything under eighteen. By eleven o'clock I had picked up another \$2000, making a total of \$6000 for the night.

I glanced at my watch. I should be home in bed by now. I have quite regular habits. I rose. "I guess that's enough for this evening."

Adrienne also consulted her timepiece. "Leaving so early? Going to cut and run?"

"I'm afraid so. For tonight, at least."

"Then you'll be back?"

"I plan to return tomorrow."

She seemed satisfied with that. "I may be here myself."

I had not noticed her making any bets of her own. "Oh? Do you gamble too?"

She smiled. "I like to watch. Some people think I bring them luck."

I cashed in my chips. When I stepped outside, I discovered it was raining. Damn, I thought, what rotten luck. I dashed for my Cadillac in the parking lot and drove home. When I pulled in between the gateposts and up the winding drive, it was approximately 11:30. I parked the car in the oval before the house.

All the windows were dark. Apparently everyone, including the servants on the third floor, had gone to bed.

I let myself in with my key and went upstairs to my rooms on the second floor. I emptied my wallet and stared at the money. Why do other men gamble, I wondered. Sickness? Stupidity?

I had a brandy and soda and then went to bed.

In the morning I joined Aunt Sarah in the sun room at breakfast. I kissed her cheek and then sat down to Canadian bacon and scrambled eggs.

"You came home rather late last night, Roger," she said.

"You were up? The house was dark."

"My insomnia. Where were you?"

"I went to a movie."

She frowned. "I hope it wasn't one of those X-rated things."

"No, Aunt Sarah. Only Restricted."

She appeared mollified. "Well, you *are* an adult, after all, and I guess Restricted can't be too harmful. But I suppose they used a lot of four-letter words?"

"Actually there really aren't too many explicit four-letter words. However, the ones available were repeated frequently."

Aunt Sarah is my father's sister. She never married. My father and my mother are both deceased, victims of a commercial air disaster while I was a junior in college.

After the funeral I discovered that my parents' estate consisted principally of debts. Aunt Sarah accepted it as her duty to see me through college. I had rather expected that she would turn me out to work of some kind once I was graduated, but she seemed to prefer having me about the house. It is not that we are particularly close. I suspect that she simply wants someone of her family nearby.

After breakfast, as I excused myself, Aunt Sarah handed me the familiar long white envelope. Inside I would find a check for \$1000, my allowance for the month.

I kissed her cheek again. "You are most kind and generous, Aunt Sarah."

That evening at eight I returned to Jason's Club. I saw Adrienne at the bar with a rather portly and faintly familiar gentleman. Swenson? Swanson? He was a vice president, or something like that, in one of Aunt Sarah's conglomerates.

When Adrienne saw me, she abandoned him and joined me. "Well, well, you did keep your word to come back, didn't you, Mr. Wentworth?"

I did not remember having given her my name the previous night, but perhaps I was mistaken. I went to the cashier, purchased \$1000 worth of chips and moved to the roulette table.

"I thought blackjack was your game?" Adrienne asked.

"At the moment I feel the urge for roulette."

At the end of the hour I had won \$3000.

As I played, I became aware of a rather thin, black-haired man off to one side, watching me intently. I recognized him as Jason, the owner of the club. I had never met him personally, but I had seen his picture in the newspapers a number of times.

I gathered my chips and moved to the blackjack tables. I sat down and was dealt a queen down and a nine up. The dealer's exposed card was a king.

"Hit me," I said.

I received a deuce. Twenty-one.

"I don't believe it," Adrienne said. "You hit a *nineteen*?"

"The dealer has a king up. I suspected he had a twenty, which, of course, would have made my nineteen insufficient."

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The dealer proved to have a concealed ten. Twenty, but not enough.

I continued to win. A few ups and downs, but generally I won, despite the fact that the dealer frequently broke the seals of new decks. Finally Jason replaced him with another dealer, who, I presumed, he felt he could trust more fully. Nothing, however, availed the house.

Adrienne followed me to the cashier. "You seem to have a lot of luck." Her smile did not quite reach her eyes. "Or is it really luck?"

I put my winnings into my wallet. "I'll return tomorrow night."

At home I counted the \$12,000 I had accumulated in the last two nights. I made myself a thoughtful drink.

As is my weekly custom, on Wednesday, I had lunch with Amos Tillman at his favorite restaurant. Tillman is Aunt Sarah's attorney, financial adviser, and regards himself as a friend of the family.

He studied the menu. "By the way, Roger, I've heard that you seem to have taken up gambling."

"Swenson?"

"Swanson. He mentioned that he's seen you at a place called Jason's Club. Twice."

"What was Swanson doing at Jason's Club? Twice?"

Tillman shrugged. "That's his problem. But, Roger, if you're going to gamble, why pick that particular club?"

"I didn't know it was a particular club. I'm rather naive about things like that. I happened to be driving in the vicinity and found myself out of cigarettes. I dropped in at what I thought was merely a bar. I discovered that gambling was available, and never having gambled, I decided to give it a whirl."

"You seem to be a fairly intelligent man, Roger. Why this sudden mania for gambling?"

"I would hardly call it a mania. I've been there only twice."

"Do you know anything about this Jason?"

"I've read a few things about him in the newspapers."

Tillman nodded. "He's spent half of his life in prison. Assault, armed robbery—you name it. He's also been picked up on suspicion of murder at least three times, but was always released for lack of evidence."

"Possibly he's a much abused innocent man."

Tillman snorted. "All his murder victims owed him considerable money at the time they met their deaths." He took a sip of his cocktail. "How much have you lost so far?"

"As a matter of fact, I've won twelve thousand dollars."

He absorbed that. "On the other hand, Roger, have you ever considered that being ahead twelve thousand dollars where a man like Jason is concerned might be just as unwise as owing him twelve thousand and being unable to pay? They amount to the same thing, you know. He's out twelve thousand dollars."

"By the way," I said, "I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention anything about this to Aunt Sarah, even though I'm winning. You know how puritan she is on the subject of gambling."

That night I returned to Jason's Club.

Adrienne McCloskey, as usual, joined me at the roulette table.

After two hours I had lost approximately \$1000. I moved to the blackjack tables and by eleven had managed to lose another \$1000.

I prepared to leave.

"How much did you lose?" Adrienne asked.

I shrugged. "Three thousand, I suppose."

She corrected me. "Two thousand."

I smiled. "Oh, well, you can't win all the time."

"No," Adrienne said, "you can't. But you're still ten thousand ahead of the game."

"I'll be back tomorrow night."

At breakfast the next morning Aunt Sarah said, "You seem to have become a night owl. More movies?"

"I'm afraid I've become an addict."

"Well, it's your money. But I understand the admission price these days is outrageous. I can remember when even a downtown theater didn't dare charge more than forty or fifty cents, and that included the tax." She buttered her toast. "I've been thinking about your Wellington invitation."

She was referring to the invitation I had received from Thaddeus Wellington and his wife to spend a few weeks with them on his cattle ranch on the island of Hawaii. Thaddeus had been my roommate at college and until I had met him, I hadn't even been aware that there were cattle ranches on Hawaii, much less huge ones.

Aunt Sarah put down her butter knife. "I've decided that you may go."

"That's very generous of you, Aunt Sarah. You're positive you won't be lonely here?"

"I'll manage."

"How long shall I stay?"

"One week should be enough, I'd think."

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After breakfast I phoned our travel agent and made the necessary arrangements for the trip to Hawaii. I decided that I would go near the end of the month.

That night at Jason's Club I lost \$5000.

The next night \$6000, which included my monthly allowance. I was now \$1000 behind the game.

I prepared to leave. "Well, that's that. Thirteen thousand dollars down the drain."

Adrienne had continued to keep track. "Actually you've lost only one thousand dollars of your own money." She smiled encouragingly. "You'll be back tomorrow, of course? Your luck is bound to change."

"I'm afraid not. I'm flat broke."

She couldn't believe that. "Flat broke? How could you be flat broke, Mr. Wentworth?"

"Well, actually I'm not flat broke, I suppose. It's simply that at the moment I just don't have any ready cash. I can't even write out a check. My assets are tied up and I won't be able to lay my hands on cash until the first of next month."

She thought that over. "You *do* live in that big place on the lake front?"

"Why, yes. Wentworths have occupied Cresthill since it was constructed over one hundred years ago."

"And it's all paid for? No mortgage?"

"Of course."

She pursued the subject. "What I mean is, you're not head over heels in debt, or something like that, are you?"

I drew myself up. "My dear woman, I don't owe one cent to any soul on earth and my credit rating is impeccable."

She seemed convinced. "Good. Well, then there's no reason for your fun to be stopped just because you can't put your hands on cash right now. Maybe you could borrow some money?"

"Well, I suppose I could go to some of my friends tomorrow."

"That's not what I meant. Why not ask Jason for a little credit?"

"I've never met the man. Why would he give me credit?"

"I'll vouch for you."

"Do you know Jason?"

She nodded. "I've met him a few times. He's a generous, understanding man."

She left me for the moment and approached Jason, who was lounging at the bar watching his patrons at play. The two of them went into a short conference, then she looked my way and beckoned.

They led me down a narrow corridor to the rear of the club and into a small office.

Jason, who was perhaps in his early forties, smiled. "Mr. Wentworth, Adrienne has explained your situation to me. I'm sure that we can arrange something. Your credit here is good. All you have to do is sign an I.O.U. How much would you like?"

I had never borrowed money before in my life and the process embarrassed me. "Well, I really don't know."

"A thousand? Two? Name it, Mr. Wentworth."

I signed an I.O.U. for \$1000 and got the chips from the cashier. I lost them by eleven. I rose from the blackjack table. "That's it for tonight."

Adrienne had a smile for me. "But you *are* coming back tomorrow, aren't you?"

"Well, is my credit still good?"

"It's good."

Six nights later I owed Jason \$14,000.

In his office again, I said, "Could I possibly borrow just a little bit more?"

He had confidence in my ability to repay. "Name it."

"Would five thousand this time be too much?"

His eyes flickered for just a moment. "Of course not, Mr. Wentworth." He watched me write out the I.O.U. "You *did* say that you'd have cash at the beginning of next month?"

"But of course. On the other hand, I just might not need it. After all, I'm due to hit a winning streak, am I not?"

When I entered his office again on the twenty-fifth of the month, I owed him \$34,000.

Asking for money still embarrassed me. "I was wondering, just how good is my credit? I mean, just how much more may I borrow?"

He brought out and toted up my I.O.U.'s, though I rather suspected that he knew my indebtedness to the penny. "Well, you know how it is, Mr. Wentworth, I don't like my books to get too unbalanced. It's just good business to keep things under control. Not let anybody get in too deep. For their own protection." He glanced at his desk calendar. "I'd say that I could carry you to forty thousand. But that's the limit."

I rubbed my chin thoughtfully. "Somehow I feel lucky tonight, but still I'd like to have enough money to ride out any losing streak I might experience. Could you make that six thousand dollars tonight?"

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He wanted to be sure I understood. "The limit?"

"Yes. The limit."

At the roulette table I began winning—some \$5000 before the tide once again turned. By ten thirty I had lost it all, including the \$6000 I had just borrowed from Jason.

I wiped my forehead and then spoke to Adrienne. "Could I see you privately for a few moments?"

She shrugged. "I suppose so."

"Good. Perhaps in my car? We could take a drive while I explain something to you."

When we were out on the highway I said, "Adrienne, I feel a bit guilty about what's happened and about what's about to happen, and so I thought I should tell you first. Especially since you so generously vouched for my credit."

Something new appeared in her voice. "Have you got any idea of welshing?"

"Good heavens, no. I fully intend to pay Jason every cent I owe—however, not quite with the alacrity he expects. It will be at the rate of five hundred dollars per month. At the end of six years and eight months I shall have discharged my obligation entirely."

For a few moments there was silence, and then she said, "I thought you were coming into cash the first of the month?"

"I am. However, it isn't quite as much as Jason might have expected. You see, on the first of the month—every first of the month—I receive cash, but it's only one thousand dollars."

She seemed stunned. "A thousand dollars? *One* thousand dollars?"

I nodded. "I am most scrupulous about debts of honor, Adrienne. I think sending perhaps five hundred dollars a month to Jason would be quite equitable. That would leave me with just enough to scrape by."

She began seething. "Hell, I know the Wentworths have got money. I looked it up. What about that big estate and all?"

"Not in my name. Nor is this car."

Her voice rose. "Buster, Jason wants his dough and he wants all of it on the first of the month. Do you know what happens to people who welsh on Jason?"

"Well, I've heard rumors."

"Believe them. Either Jason gets his money or he gets you."

I sighed. "I was afraid of that. Therefore I've had the foresight to make arrangements to disappear. For at least six years and eight

months, during which time Jason will receive five hundred dollars each month as I promised."

She vetoed that immediately. "Not good enough. Wherever you go, Jason will track you down."

"Nonsense. He is only one man who can command the hired services of perhaps two or three violent men. And two or three men can't possibly canvas the surface of this earth in search of one man who will be taking the utmost precautions. The dubious chance of finding me for profitless revenge could easily cost him much more than I owe him. No. I am positive that Jason, once he survives his fury and resorts to reason, will accept patience as his only course."

She gave an order. "Take me back to the club."

I drove back.

She got out of the car. "Wait right here."

But I had no intention of waiting for Jason or anyone else he might send out. As soon as she disappeared into the building I hastily drove off. I continued on to the airport and its parking lot and then carried my two prepacked suitcases into the terminal.

I boarded a plane which took me to San Francisco, where I changed planes and finally disembarked at Hilo in the Hawaiian Islands.

I enjoyed three days with Thaddeus Wellington and his wife before I received a long-distance phone call from Amos Tillman.

He announced that he had some bad news for me. My Aunt Sarah was dead. She had been murdered by some intruder who had broken into the house during the night. The police had, as yet, been unable to apprehend the criminal.

I put down the phone.

Who had killed her? I wondered. Jason? One of his men? Perhaps even Adrienne?

Had it been Jason or Adrienne who had arrived at the conclusion that the only way I could possibly repay my debt with the speed desired was to see to it that I came into money of my own?

I sighed. I would pay Jason as soon as the estate was settled and I would never gamble again. Gambling is for fools. Certainly one cannot count on winning, and, as a matter of fact, there are times when one could not even count on losing, as I had learned during my first two nights at Jason's Club.

I made myself a drink.

It had worked.

If it hadn't, I would, of course, have had to turn to something less devious. But it had worked.

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To:

How does one go about finding and hiring a professional killer? Does one advertise in the newspapers? Certainly not. Does one go to one's friends or even to strangers and ask? Not if one is at all wise. There are too many dangers and pitfalls in such approaches. And one always faces the subsequent risk of blackmail or incrimination.

No, the only way to hire a killer is to hire one *who doesn't know he's being hired*.

And how much does that cost?

Well, in my case, \$40,000.



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